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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 4 July 2003, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. HUSSEIN (Ethiopia)
(Vice-President)

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OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (continued)

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In the absence of Mr. Rosenthal (Guatemala), Mr. Hussein (Ethiopia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (agenda item 3) (continued)

High-level panel discussion: an impartial and independent assessment of the extent to which the United Nations funds, programmes and agencies at the field level learn lessons from their evaluations and the formulation of proposals on how to improve the feedback mechanisms at the field level (E/2003/64)

The PRESIDENT welcomed the panellists and announced that Mr. Civili, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, would act as moderator.

Mr. CIVILI (Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs), Moderator, said that one of the main elements emerging from the 2001 Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review was the need for more systematic learning from programme evaluations within the United Nations. The panellists came from a range of backgrounds, reflecting the variety of actors involved in evaluation activities: bilateral partners, the secretariat of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), international agencies and independent evaluators. The participatory nature of the evaluation process, in which outcomes were shared between all key stakeholders, was a major factor in efforts to enhance the performance of the United Nations system. While individual agencies had been making substantial progress in that regard, there was currently too little system-wide evaluation activity at the country level. Therefore the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) should be seen as an unprecedented opportunity for the adoption of a more system-wide approach.

Mr. KIRK (Head of Evaluation Department, Department for International Development, United Kingdom), Panellist, said that, with regard to evaluation activities, the challenge was to bridge the divide between researchers, on one hand, and decision makers, on the other. Evaluation processes contained two separate but mutually reinforcing elements: taking note of the lessons learned and accountability. Learning lessons enabled an organization to evolve and to manage change effectively.

The myth that policy-making followed an entirely rational pattern, beginning with the identification and assessment of alternatives, and finishing with straightforward implementation of the best option, was a fallacy that tended to hide the more shapeless process through which lessons were assimilated into policy and practice. Referring to research conducted at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, he said that policy ideas sometimes emerged in a variety of forums, and took shape in confused fashion according to what was known as the whisper effect. At other times, policies developed through a sudden interest in a particular theme, leading to the so-called snowball effect, as policy makers hurried to jump on the bandwagon.

It was important to ask who was learning from evaluation, and for what purpose. While new technologies were undoubtedly helpful, people should be placed at the centre of learning activities. It was not always desirable, in the case of senior managers, for instance, for everyone to acquire detailed knowledge from evaluation processes. Robert Chambers, an administrative trainer, had used the phrase "optimal ignorance" to describe how senior staff should not be overloaded with details. The knowledge required by heads of department could be compared to high-octane fuel, whereas other staff members needed the specialist knowledge to ensure that no loss of quality occurred during the refining process. Learning from evaluation should be results-oriented. For instance, the Economic and Social Council should focus on its role as a standard-setting body, leaving others to learn specific lessons regarding service delivery.

The challenge was to go beyond lesson learning, and to have clear ideas about how to put those lessons into practice. Evaluation must succeed in connecting people with people, in order to facilitate knowledge sharing. That would be an important step in widening the sense of programme ownership. As E.M. Forster wrote in his novel Howards End: "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will live in fragments no longer." Those words had great resonance for the United Nations system.

Mr. LUNDGREN (Adviser on Aid Effectiveness, Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)), Panellist, said that a new context had emerged to facilitate managing for results in development cooperation. For the first time, a comprehensive set of goals had been agreed upon by the States Members of the United Nations, providing a clear framework for results. Furthermore, a new

resource environment was emerging in which, following a 30 per cent decline in aid resources over the past decade, major donors had recently committed themselves to a substantial increase in development assistance. The DAC secretariat had recorded a 5 per cent increase in aid levels in 2002.

However, the projected increases were dependent upon demonstrated results. At the Thirteenth Replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA), donor countries had built an explicit reference to a results-monitoring system into the replenishment agreement. Many United Nations agencies and bilateral donors were already strengthening their management systems and adopting a more results-based approach. Some developing countries, such as Chile and Uganda, had introduced results-oriented management and budget systems. Evaluation had a key role to play in the new focus on results, since it was the only reliable way of assessing programme outcomes. In fact, results-based management and evaluation were mutually reinforcing, since the regular measurement of programme activities could also improve the relevance of evaluation work.

The DAC secretariat had enhanced its evaluation processes by seeking to facilitate collaboration at all stages. A number of joint evaluations had been launched with other agencies and, although each agency still focused too much on internal needs, a sense of shared accountability had begun to emerge. A common glossary of key terms had been developed to foster a more professional approach to joint evaluations. Peer reviews, consisting of two donors examining another donor's policies and programmes, were also conducted, with a view to establishing an informal framework for evaluation.

Lesson learning and accountability were twin, complementary elements of evaluation. For instance, in school systems, examinations were a means of evaluating learning retention, while accountability was ensured through the grade system. Besides its potential to improve the learning process, accountability was also the main driver of evaluation. With a view to enhancing accountability, the Government of Sweden had recently proposed the creation of an independent evaluation office to assess the achievements of development cooperation.

Lesson learning was a generic concept, to which there were a number of important phases. The follow-up measures to recommendations contained in evaluation reports were a

particularly important stage, and care should be taken to identify the audience to which evaluations were presented. Nevertheless, learning also took place during the initial formulation of assessment questions, as well as during the evaluation itself.

There should be greater interaction between the United Nations specialized agencies and DAC, as well as more system-wide evaluation initiatives in the United Nations and a comprehensive review of the evaluation functions and methodologies of the United Nations specialized agencies. The recommendations that emerged from evaluations needed to be more actively followed up, and efforts should be made to ensure that the evaluation agenda was actually relevant to the priorities of the partner countries. Partner countries should be given more responsibility and there must be a clear focus on national capacity-building.

Mr. LAVIZZARI (Director of Evaluation Office, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)), Panellist, said that IFAD conducted independent evaluations in accordance with four main criteria, namely, independence of vested interests; accountability and performance assessment; properly structured feedback and learning; and partnership as a foundation for ownership of evaluation recommendations. Lessons were learned from independent evaluation through strategic directions and evaluation instruments. As far as strategic directions were concerned, users of evaluation results (for example policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations) formed partnerships to learn together and nurture ownership. Project evaluations were supplemented by policy, programme and thematic evaluations which made it easier to extrapolate general conclusions. Efforts were made to ensure that evaluations were relevant and useful by linking them to the main business processes of IFAD, for example, policy evaluations were performed only before the formulation of a new IFAD strategy or policy or when IFAD had decided to embark upon a project. Evaluation results were subsequently consolidated at the organizational level and IFAD management was responsible for ensuring that any recommendations were adopted and their implementation monitored.

The various evaluation instruments included the Annual Evaluation Work Programme, under which the Evaluation Office retained final authority over content but remained open to requests from its partners in the field; the Approach Paper, which described the objectives and methodology of the evaluation and was circulated to partners for comments, insights and

suggestions, thereby ensuring transparency and participation; the Core Learning Partnership, consisting of the main users of the evaluation, which was intended to deepen understanding of any recommendations and determine how best to implement them and the Agreement at Completion Point which drew a distinction between those recommendations judged to be acceptable and those judged to be unacceptable, assigned responsibilities and deadlines, flagged evaluation insights and learning hypotheses for future debate, and ensured that the partners were accountable for the implementation of the recommendations. Workshops, round tables and video conferences were frequently used tools for learning lessons and drawing conclusions; the methodological framework used was based on internationally accepted criteria such as impact, performance of the policy or project and performance of the partners involved. The annual report on the results and impacts of IFAD operations was a key document for consolidating results and analysing why certain achievements had been possible and others not. Results and learning were transmitted through differentiated communications products, having regard to the target audience. Reports, profiles, insights, web pages, local-language press and video presentations were all used. Finally, in order to translate lessons learned into practical reality, use was made of project, strategy and policy development teams.

To ensure that evaluation and feedback were truly effective, they had to be incorporated into existing business practices. Users must be encouraged to develop ownership of evaluation findings and recommendations, it being recognized that ownership required joint learning by evaluators and users alike. Evaluation users should form partnerships consisting of partners with a variety of expectations, roles and interests. The special role of the poor must be acknowledged, and their position strengthened in interaction with implementing agencies, Governments and IFAD. Evaluation processes should be treated as a privileged opportunity for IFAD and other development agencies to learn from the poor. Lastly, it was essential to tailor communication to the needs of different audiences and to ensure that IFAD management was fully accountable for the adoption and implementation of the evaluation recommendations.

Mr. NURUL (Deputy Director of Evaluation Office, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)), Panellist, said that UNDP was a field-based organization with a strong presence at the country level. Lesson learning was not a fad; it was a prerequisite for survival in a competitive development arena. In the current climate, development agencies had to do more with less. Their clients demanded cost-effective and creative solutions, focused on results.

Agencies such as UNDP had to operate in a globalized world that was much more competitive than had formerly been the case, and the traditional comparative advantage of being part of the United Nations system had consequently diminished. It was essential to build knowledge capital and make a commitment to continuous learning in order to innovate. Innovation sustained by knowledge and the learning of lessons enhanced adaptability and the leveraging of knowledge. Yet lessons were properly learned only if they were relevant and timely, if they addressed business priorities and supported decision-making, and if they were easily accessible, manageable and customized to the particular needs of the target audience.

UNDP had gradually transformed itself into a knowledge-based learning organization offering a core service of capacity development and policy development support. Results-based management had become firmly entrenched. Accordingly, UNDP's evaluation function currently focused on the creation and promotion of knowledge and learning; the extraction and dissemination of lessons and good practice derived from evaluation; and the absorption of evaluation lessons aimed at supporting and enriching strategic management, programme development, effectiveness, decision-making, advocacy and creativity.

At the country level, evaluation could be applied to good practice, innovations, methodologies, policies, strategies and contacts, whereas evaluative lessons originated from evaluation professionals, project evaluations, country evaluations, the evaluation of regional and global level projects, policy and strategic evaluations, thematic evaluations and external sources. The services of a "learning enabler" such as UNDP were essential to bridge the gap between the evaluated and the evaluator through the provision of an "evaluation knowledge management system" to process, synthesize and customize the wealth of evaluative material available.

UNDP services included an Evaluation Resource Centre, knowledge products, an evaluation network and training modules. All its resources were web-based and user-friendly, focusing on the provision of real-time solutions to real-time needs through an interactive and participatory approach. Historically, the evaluation function had come a long way, but its enormous potential was still seriously underutilized.

Some remaining challenges included the need to deepen the evaluation culture, recognizing that a focus on results created incentives and promoted managerial accountability. It

was also essential to concentrate on current and relevant issues and, accordingly, strategic and opportunistic thinking that would add real value to managerial solutions should be encouraged. All lessons learned must be customized and tailored to the intended audience, and every effort made to develop capacity at the country level. Lastly, some concern had been expressed about evaluation "bombardment", and efforts were therefore being made at the inter-agency level to harmonize and coordinate evaluation operations and devise common evaluation standards.

Mr. PATEL (Director of Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), Panellist, said that, as a decentralized and field-based organization, UNICEF was best served by evaluation activities that were integrated into the planning process through annual country reports and integrated monitoring and evaluation plans for the programme cycle. The situation analyses prepared by UNICEF already included a conceptual framework of causality, which would soon be integrated into common country assessments. UNICEF also incorporated results-based programming and management in the design of projects and programmes. The fact that the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) included a monitoring and evaluation plan would greatly facilitate inter-agency collaboration.

UNICEF was promoting a utilization focus at every stage of the evaluation process and maintained a special web site to disseminate evaluation results. The results of evaluations of individual countries were discussed by the staff at regional meetings and desk reviews were carried out at headquarters and in the regional offices. The reactions to two special issues produced by UNICEF of the journal Evaluation and Programme Planning suggested that reports of evaluations should be kept as short as possible and that they should focus on one subject at a time; the second of those issues had been devoted to activities in the area of the human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

UNICEF provided introductory monitoring and training workshops but had found that there was a need for a higher level of training. It had therefore helped to set up professional associations of evaluators in various countries around the world to provide such training. The African Evaluation Association had already held two successful conferences, with parallel strands organized by the World Bank and agencies such as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). UNICEF was working to replicate that success elsewhere, notably in Latin America.

Two international organizations, the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) and the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), had been set up to support the growing number of national evaluation groups. The former, which was an organization sponsored by civil society and receiving support in the form of funds and expertise from various international agencies, was a fine example of cooperation between organizations of the United Nations system and professional associations in the area of evaluation.

Ensuring the quality of evaluation work posed a real challenge to the United Nations system. UNICEF was integrating existing professional quality-control standards into its training manual for programme planners and into its medium-term strategic plan, as well as into its monitoring and evaluation training package. It already recommended that evaluators should apply those standards - which had been applied to the special issue of Evaluation and Programme Planning devoted to HIV/AIDS - and intended to make it compulsory to do so. Meanwhile, the African Evaluation Association had developed its own version of quality-control standards and was working with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to incorporate a gender dimension into them.

Mr. WIESNER (Senior Partner, Wiesner & Asociados, Colombia), Panellist, suggested that one reason why evaluations were not more effective in changing behaviour was that they often took place against a background of an uninterrupted flow of resources. The purpose of a real, as opposed to a nominal, evaluation was to influence policies and thus the allocation of resources, but if the resources continued to flow regardless of the outcome of the evaluation, the evaluation exercise, however elaborate and professional, became a pointless one. The threat of cuts in resources was a strong encouragement for those concerned to work more effectively. Evaluation should therefore be seen as a form of incentive. It might be argued that resources such as official development assistance (ODA) had already been cut, but while they might have fallen as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), they had not necessarily fallen in absolute terms and sometimes resources had just been reallocated to other, more deserving, programmes. Likewise, although the core resources of some institutions might have been reduced, non-core resources had sometimes been increased. He was not advocating cuts in funding levels in the name of greater effectiveness but rather calling for a change in the way

funding was distributed. An incentive-based evaluation system ensured that resources were allocated to those who achieved the best results and could even lead to increased budgets for successful programmes.

Mr. GHAI (Evaluator Consultant, Kenya), Panellist, said that his own experience as Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) bore out Mr. Wiesner's last point. When he had taken up his post, the Institute - which depended entirely on voluntary contributions - had just received a very poor evaluation report and one of its major donors had promptly cut its contribution by one third. The Institute had been forced to undertake a major restructuring, with the result that the next evaluation had been very positive and the cuts restored: subsequent evaluations had been even better and contributions had risen accordingly. It was very important to have external evaluations, as there was much to be learned from an outsider's viewpoint and they provided a great opportunity for cementing relationships with the donors.

Referring to his previous experience in evaluating programmes, he stressed how important it was to study the impact of programmes on a whole range of issues, not just on the rate of return on investment or the relation between costs and benefits. For example, when he had evaluated a number of microfinance projects for IFAD, he had looked not only at their impact on the incomes of the intended beneficiaries, but also at their effect on important areas such as the status of women, nutrition, social reform and institutional development. When evaluating the impact of United Nations activities on poverty reduction in Viet Nam for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), he had been particularly impressed by the collaboration between the Government of Viet Nam, United Nations agencies, the World Bank and NGOs, particularly in the preparation of two major surveys and a key government document on development and poverty-reduction strategies. It should be noted that Viet Nam had one of the most impressive records of all developing countries in reducing poverty.

The overall picture of the effectiveness of United Nations-backed projects and programmes had been disappointing, however: they often placed too much emphasis on inputs - the number of experts hired or the amount of seed provided, for example - and not enough on impact. They also tended to rely on internal evaluations, with all the limitations of

that process. There was clearly plenty of scope for strengthening evaluation capacities within the United Nations system; equally clearly, evaluation was an extremely valuable tool for increasing the effectiveness of its programmes.

The PRESIDENT thanked the panellists for providing a background to the process of evaluation and invited the participants to put questions to them.

Mr. IKOUEBE (Congo) said that there was clearly a genuine will to coordinate efforts in the area of evaluation. It would be interesting to know the extent to which UNDP took into account the assessments made by operators in the field when evaluating its own programmes at the country level.

Mr. AKINSANYA (Nigeria) said that evaluation was a two-way process that affected both the evaluators and the users of evaluations. He would like to know how much importance was attached to local expertise in the evaluation process. Local participation was crucial to the ownership of policies and programmes.

Mr. EVANS (United Kingdom) said that a number of common threads had emerged from the panellists' statements. In the first place, it had become clear that a results-based focus was essential not only to take stock of progress but also to drive the process of change within the international framework for development cooperation. Secondly, all the panellists had emphasized the need for partnership, not only between the United Nations agencies, but also with Governments, as the lessons learned from evaluation had to extend beyond the single agency or organization if they were to have any real value. The third common thread was accountability. A results-based focus strengthened rather than diminished the accountability imperative in respect of evaluation. Emphasis, however, was still placed largely on the accountability of the supply side, which was used as a way of assuring managers or taxpayers that their resources would be put to good use in promoting development. However, it was important to consider how to use evaluation more effectively in order to increase accountability towards poor people. It would be interesting to hear the panellists' views on that issue. It would also be interesting to know whether adopting a results-based approach had made a difference to the content of evaluations and the methods used to undertake them.

Mr. WIESNER (Senior Partner, Wiesner & Asociados, Colombia), Panellist, said that the evaluation process would become demand-driven as soon as evaluation was considered to be an incentive. Suppliers would be obliged to devise the most efficient and appropriate methods of evaluation if they wished buyers to use their services again.

Mr. PATEL (Director of Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), Panellist, said that one of the recommendations of the African Evaluation Association was that there should be an increased use of local expertise. Consequently, it had created a very comprehensive database containing detailed information about more than 300 evaluators from a broad range of sectors throughout Africa.

The adoption of a results-based approach to evaluation facilitated the task of choosing a subject because programmes became more focused. In addition, the goals of a results-based management system were clearer, allowing for the identification of problems with a certain amount of precision. However, as such systems encouraged impact assessment at the highest possible level, there was a danger that efforts could exceed the feasible limits of attribution of the work of a particular agency in a specific area, making it more difficult to establish a causal link within the evaluation process.

On the issue of accountability towards the poor, he said that programme evaluation standards required consultation with stakeholders. UNICEF was striving to increase the involvement of young people in its evaluation processes, as it had become clear that evaluations designed and implemented by adults alone led to adult-orientated conclusions and recommendations.

The PRESIDENT said that it would be interesting to know whether the panellists found the notion of peer group evaluation useful and asked whether they attached much importance to external evaluations.

Mr. NURUL (Deputy Director of Evaluation Office, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)), Panellist, said that adopting a results-based approach could result in a conflict between organizational effectiveness and development effectiveness. He had once been involved in the implementation of a United Nations literacy programme in Indonesia. Regular evaluations of the programme, which had extended over a 12-year period, had rated it very

highly. Curiously enough, however, it had become apparent that the overall literacy rate was declining in the areas where the programme was being implemented. It was clearly necessary, therefore, to look beyond the organizational delivery of inputs and the production of outputs and to consider the wider issue of whether the situation on the ground was actually improving. Moving the evaluation frontier from the project base to higher levels was a very important challenge.

It made no sense to conduct evaluations using external expertise flown in for short periods; such evaluations were likely to be highly subjective. For every evaluation, a certain amount of preparation should be done on the ground, using national evaluation teams. UNDP had taken steps in that direction.

With regard to the issue of cooperation and coordination between development partners, there was an in-built practice among the United Nations agencies and development partners to carry out research into the activities taking place in the area to be evaluated, prior to the evaluation. The next step was to increase cooperation during the evaluation process.

Maintenance of the independence of the evaluation function was very important. The vast majority of UNDP evaluators were external and all evaluations were reported to the Executive Board, which included representatives of 36 States. Although the United Nations system had not yet started to conduct peer group evaluations, it was hoped that efforts would be made in the near future to place that issue on the agenda.

Ms. BERTRAND (Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System) said that the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) had been established some 30 years previously to investigate and inspect in an independent manner the efficiency of the United Nations system. Its inspectors were elected by the General Assembly to serve the Member States by providing an independent view on how the system or individual agencies worked. The Member States might wish to consider whether or not the Unit had been used as efficiently as it might have been. The current challenge was to move beyond organizational effectiveness towards partnership and joint responsibility for the system. No single actor could affect the results alone.

The PRESIDENT said that, as a Vice-President of the General Assembly, he was able to confirm that the JIU was not being used to the best of its capacity. The Unit's reports and recommendations did not usually receive the follow-up they deserved. Efforts should be made to maximize its use by the United Nations system.

Mr. D'ANGELO (Chief, Development Cooperation Policy Branch, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)) said that the convergence of views among the panellists could be attributed partly to the fact that they were all evaluators. He wondered whether the same views would have emerged from non-evaluators such as the persons responsible for the management of operational activities.

Efforts had been made, when preparing the Report of the Secretary-General on the assessment of the lessons learned by United Nations organizations from evaluation activities at the field level (E/2003/64), to address the role of both evaluators and non-evaluators. For example, DESA had interacted closely with the evaluation offices of the entire United Nations system and had established an inter-agency task force on the lessons learned from evaluations in order to benefit from the wisdom of the various organizations. It had also held consultations with the users of evaluations at the country level, namely, those responsible for making management decisions concerning the implementation of programmes and projects.

United Nations officials and partners actively involved in country-level operations all had a role to play in the evaluation work, partly because of the decentralization of the evaluation process and partly because greater emphasis was being placed on a participatory approach. Many of the activities conducted by DESA were not considered by the professional evaluators to constitute real evaluation. There was no denying, however, that many of its activities contained an evaluation component. Self-evaluation should be taken into account as much as independent evaluation; the two types of evaluation should not be mutually exclusive. In fact, they should complement each other.

In his report, the Secretary-General highlighted the fact that, while the level and complexity of knowledge from all sources for decision-making was increasing so rapidly that it risked overwhelming policy makers and United Nations system managers, not enough thought

had been devoted to determining how to learn collectively from evaluations. The only way to decide what benefits lesson learning could bring and where lessons could have the most effect was to adopt a strategic approach.

Mr. CIVILI (Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs), Moderator, said that the debate had revealed the emergence of a common management culture within the United Nations system leading increasingly to the adoption of common approaches to evaluation. Although many improvements had been made to the system, it was clear that much still remained to be done in terms of achieving a truly integrated approach with regard to the outcome of evaluation on decision-making and policy development and in terms of shifting emphasis from evaluating the outcome of activities to evaluating the real impact of those activities. It was still unclear to what extent such an evaluation should take place.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.